

TROUBLED IRAQ: KEYSTONE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Disorder and Discontent Threaten Anglo-American Aims

JON KIMCHE

OIL is to Iraq what sex-appeal is to a woman; without it Iraq would have little attraction for the outside world. But with her overflowing endowments in this direction, it is understandable why she has been, above all others, the country which the Foreign Office had considered most suitable to be Britain's chosen friend in the Middle East. This being so, it is almost incredible that the British should have blundered into becoming the pet bogey of the Iraqis. Mr. Bevin would have had the shock of his life had he been with me touring the country barely six weeks after the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty at Portsmouth, granting special privileges to the British in Iraq. Not even in Palestine have I met such universal and uninhibited anti-British sentiment.

The younger British officials dotted about the country, who come into contact with the people and therefore have no influence in matters of policy, have no illusions about the situation; but they occupy such low positions in the foreign service hierarchy that their existence is probably not even known in London. These young men, who have grown up in the refreshingly outspoken school of the last war, "which knew not Lawrence," would like the British govern-

ment to go to the Iraqis and say—in the words of one such British official: "We do not like you, we do not like your country, we do not like your climate, and we do not like your politics; but we do love your oil. And for the sake of your oil, we will put up with you, with your country, and with your politics; but please let's not pretend otherwise." And this is also the view of the great majority of Iraqis. "The British do not like us any more than we like them," they will tell you again and again. "It's our oil they want; why fool ourselves?"

Insofar as the British have noticed signs of unpopularity—and they could not very well fail to notice the opposition which resulted in the non-ratification of the Portsmouth Treaty—they attribute this state of affairs to a small clique of agitators, inspired by the Communists and Russians on the Left and by the supporters of Rashid Ali and the Istaqlal Party on the extreme Right. These people, according to Embassy—and Foreign Office—opinion, have exploited the existing economic misery by putting all the blame on Britain; it cannot be considered more than a passing phase. (The Foreign Office always finds it difficult to take popular movements in other countries seriously.)

Actually, the situation in Iraq is much more serious than this explanation would allow—serious for the British, for the Americans, and, indeed, for the entire Middle East. Iraq is far more exposed than Palestine; more than any other country of the Fertile Crescent, Iraq is a weak link in the chain forged to bind the Middle East to the Anglo-American powers; internally and externally, Iraq has become a danger to the Anglo-American orientation of the Middle East. For Iraq is the first country of the

On the political chess-board that is the Middle East, with Arab nationalism, Zionism, and the great powers struggling for advantage, Iraq is a key piece. JON KIMCHE, an experienced political analyst with an intimate knowledge of the Middle East, wrote this report on Iraq after a recent visit—not his first—to that country. Mr. Kimche was until recently managing editor of the *London Tribune*, and is now a free-lance correspondent in the Middle East. He wrote the article "Middle-East Moves and Counter-Moves" in the March COMMENTARY. He was born in St. Gall, Switzerland, in 1909.

Middle East to move into a distinctly revolutionary situation—which is emphasized by her proximity to the Soviet Union and by the presence inside of Iraq of discontented minorities ready to become the active instruments of opposition to the governing class and the dynasty.

To investigate this situation closely is no mere academic exercise: hot on the heels of the British debacle in Iraq have come the Americans, bringing with them their own prescription on how to make friends of the Iraqis. For, like the British, the American State Department considers Iraq the keystone of its policy in the Middle East. But while the Americans are very conscious of the British mistakes, they regard rather lightly the perils of their own course.

THE Saleh Jabr Government, which signed the Treaty of Portsmouth with the British on February 15, was overthrown immediately, after the sanguinary "Battle of the Bridge" in the center of Bagdad, when thirty-six demonstrators and an unknown number of police were killed. A new government was formed the following day by Mohammed-al-Sadr, a respected religious leader who was, however, only a figurehead for the more activist members of the new Cabinet, who were chosen mainly for their known opposition to British influences and included for the first time since the war the leader of the Istaqlal Party, Mahdi Kubba, who became Minister of Supply. Kubba had been closely associated with Rashid Ali in 1941 in the pro-Nazi revolt against the British. He has not changed his views, and his presence in the Cabinet is a significant measure of the decline of British influence and the extremism of popular sentiment.

The new government, which was essentially the product of a popular upheaval, bowed low before the popular will and has not stopped bowing since. It refused to protect the police and even punished those who were held responsible for killing the demonstrators in the "Battle of the Bridge." It took no action against the students and others who had counter-attacked the police

and who dumped some of them into the Tigris flood waters. As a result, the police lost all authority and made no further attempts to interfere with the almost daily demonstrations. When demonstrators or strikers marched down Bagdad's main Rashid Street, the police faded away. Pickets squatted with impunity at the busiest intersections and all traffic was diverted. "The Street" became all-powerful in Iraq. In the course of one week the demonstrators successfully demanded the dismissal of an English schoolmistress, the cancellation of the visit of the Transjordan Prime Minister to Bagdad, and the withdrawal of an invitation that had been sent to King Abdullah to visit Bagdad.

Nor is this situation confined to the capital. "The Street" rules in the Kurdish capital of Sulamanyia in northern Iraq, in Erbil, a mixed center of Kurds and Arabs, and in Kirkuk and Mosul, the oil towns. The first of Lenin's famous three requisites for revolution—the disintegration of governmental authority—is obviously at hand in Iraq.

THE second of Lenin's three requisites—the existence of mass discontent against the government and the ruling groups—has also reached the point of fulfillment. The governments of Iraq change with great frequency, but they do not alter much. In the past twenty-six years there have been fifty-two governments—two a year; in the past five years there have been eleven foreign ministers. It is an accepted maxim that no government should outstay its normal span of six months.

In periods of crisis this tendency becomes doubly acute, and during the first four months of this year Iraq was faced with a particularly unpleasant situation. As a result of mismanagement by the government and corruption in high places, 170,000 tons of barley were exported from Iraq during the last year, in addition to an unknown but considerable quantity of wheat which was smuggled out of the country. But in the North the rains were poor and followed

by locusts. One day the government awoke to the fact that the harvest had brought in rather less than the normal and in some areas only twenty per cent of the normal yield. There was neither barley nor wheat left in Iraq.

The merchants and the markets responded immediately to this inviting situation. The price of barley, never more than \$25 per ton in a normal year and often as low as \$10, now rocketed to \$200 in the official market, where there was none to buy, and to \$500 in the black market. The same thing happened in the wheat market. The normal price has been \$40 to \$60 per ton. In April, the official price in Bagdad was \$450 to \$500, but supplies were available only through the black market at prices ranging around \$700.

This inflation naturally played havoc with the people's bread, the staple food of the great majority of all Iraqis. This was something that affected every family, every peasant, and every worker. At the present rates of pay, many workers, government clerks, and officials do not earn enough after a week's work to keep their families adequately fed—even with bread alone. Discontent, hunger, and starvation are the rule rather than the exception, and there are few areas exempt from this blight of abysmal poverty. In Erbil, in the north, British engineers constructing a new railway have found their laborers almost incapable of lifting their shovels, and the death rate is enormous—even from what would normally be minor illnesses.

The strongest feature of present discontent is that while it is in the first place directed against the government, it expresses itself even more emphatically against the hundred families that actually rule Iraq, and most of all against the British, who are held responsible by virtually the entire nation for Iraq's present plight. Nor does this anti-British sentiment come only from the ignorant, the poor, and the hungry who might have been influenced by Communist propaganda (which is not very strong); it comes from every side: from cabinet min-

isters, from ex-ministers who have the reputation of being pro-British, from all the party leaders, and from almost all higher government officials.

How much of this is genuine and how much merely a reflection of the general anti-British climate cannot easily be measured, but I had the impression that it was more than an ephemeral, opportunist phase of local politics. The deep bitterness against Britain often goes beyond the political margin; more than once I have heard Moslems speak of Western Christians in terms of bitterness and contempt that border on paranoiac race-hatred. (Even in the present Palestinian conflict, few Arabs use such language in speaking of the Jews.) The anti-British mood is therefore not superficial and temporary—as the Foreign Office would like to believe. And it is a mood that tomorrow may become as virulently anti-American. There is no possibility of another treaty with Britain to give the British a special military position in Iraq or provide for an automatic alliance; and while the old treaty remains in force—as it does—the agitation against it and against the British is bound to continue.

BUT there is no sign of Lenin's crucial third requisite for a successful revolution: there is no organized mass party with a revolutionary leadership. The present wave of revolutionary discontent is purely negative: against the British, against the government, against the police, against hunger. And it must be so, because whatever political impetus has been given to the public discontent has come from the extreme Right and the extreme Left, and these can agree only on negative issues. They can shout "Down with the British!"—or Nuri Said—or the Zionists; but they cannot hail Rashid Ali or Stalin or their local leaders without falling into conflict with each other.

Iraq is thus likely for some time to hover indecisively on the brink of the revolutionary precipice; and so long as this continues, the situation in Iraq will remain a major preoccupation of the British, the Americans,

and the Russians: for the strategic stakes are high.

The basic fact is the location of Habbaniya, the Royal Air Force base northwest of Bagdad. It is six hundred miles from Baku, six hundred miles from Suez, and six hundred miles from Haifa; that is, it is within long-range fighter-plane cover in all three directions. It is the only air base in the Middle East which can provide fighter protection and fighter-bomber operation on all Russian lines of approach through Northern Persia and Eastern Turkey. At the same time, it is at a safe distance from Russian air bases, an advantage not enjoyed by some of the new airfields scheduled for construction in Eastern Turkey.

Habbaniya air base is, in fact, the answer to the somewhat panicky views held by the American Secretary of Defense, Mr. Forrestal, who has said that in case of a Russian attack the Middle Eastern oilfields will become wholly indefensible. An adequate air force based on Habbaniya would make any invasion through the narrow passes of Northern Persia a risky and dubious adventure, and one that the Russians would not consider lightly.

This, however, is a purely military calculation and must now be conditioned by the internal stress in Iraq. There is no sign that the Russians are planning a direct descent upon the northern plateau of Iraq; but there is every sign that, as a result of the events inside the country, it may become a base of very dubious value to any Anglo-American coalition; in a crisis, the events of 1941 might be repeated, this time to the benefit of Russia instead of Germany.

IT is within this framework that the Iraq elections have taken place. Although the country appears to be dominated by anti-British sentiment, and no party and no politician would dare say a word in Britain's favor, the great majority of the new parliament (which opened June 21) has been drawn from the pro-British sheikhs. How this comes about is perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the present situation in

Iraq, and throws an interesting light on the development of British policy.

The new Parliament's 132 seats are distributed among the three major parties and the "Independents." The largest of the parties is the Istaqlal, the Independence party, representing the extreme Right. As mentioned above, its nominal leader is Rashid Ali, who headed the pro-Nazi revolt against the British in 1941 and is now in exile in Saudi Arabia, and its actual leader is Mahdi Kubba, who was closely associated with Rashid Ali's revolt and became Minister of Supply in the government formed after the repudiation of the new treaty with Britain. His right-hand man is Sadig Shenshal, who was Rashid Ali's director of propaganda during the rebellion. But the real driving force behind the party is reputedly Haj Amin, the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem—this at least is the view of expert Arab opinion in Bagdad. The Istaqlal is the best organized of the parties and the only one which enjoys some support from the nomadic tribes. Its newspaper has a daily circulation of about 4500 copies, greater than the circulation of any other Arabic newspaper in Iraq, and its influence goes considerably beyond this.

The second largest party is the National Democratic party, under the leadership of Kamil Chaderche, one of Iraq's ablest politicians and richest landlords. This party has the reputation of being leftist without being Communist; in fact, its program would be considered too conservative by the British Labor party. It has considerable influence, confined almost entirely to Bagdad, Mosul, and Basra. It claims to have ten thousand members. It is as strongly anti-British as Rashid Ali's Independence party, and it is even more feared by the British and Americans because it openly advocates Iraqi neutrality in any East-West conflict; this, the British and American Embassies believe, might paralyze Anglo-American action in case of trouble.

The third major party is the Liberal party. It is composed almost entirely of rather able but not very principled professional poli-

ticians who shift with the wind and are therefore not too friendly to Britain at present. They cannot be considered a popular force.

Two other parties, the People's party and the National Democratic Union, are banned as Communist, though neither would be classed as much more than left socialist in any European country. The real Communists are working clandestinely among students, railwaymen, and port workers.

But the three parties combined have won only seven out of the 132 seats contested (Istaqlal—4; National Democrats—2; Liberals—1). The great majority of the new Parliament—just like every previous Parliament—consists of so-called "Independents."

These are the deputies nominated rather than elected by the thousand sheikhs who own about two-thirds of all cultivable land in Iraq and constitute the strongest single force in the land: they have the money, they have the land, they are close to the Regent and the British. The sheikhs are understandably not inclined towards land reform; they also regard the danger of Communism as a personal rather than political threat. They have become therefore the conservative party par excellence, and since the British have also wanted to avoid any upheaval, they understood from the first the value of cultivating the friendship of the sheikhs.

In this way the pattern of power in Iraq was created. The Regent, the thousand sheikhs, the British—and the Iraqi government which is the creation of these three—lean on each other and help each other along. But on February 27, after the "Battle of the Bridge," new factors of power appeared on the scene to balance and neutralize the old ones.

LARGELY as a result of public demonstrations in support of the Palestine Arabs, many Iraqis learned the value and force of public demonstration. For months they had been encouraged to demonstrate against the Zionists, against the Americans, and against the Russians on the question of

Palestine. It was therefore quite natural, with the continuation of the severe food shortage, that the poor, the politically-minded students, and the calculating agitators of the extreme Left and Right should again have recourse to public demonstrations. But this time they turned against those who had inspired their earlier demonstrations, and the government which came into office after what the Iraqis call the "February Revolution" had to yield completely to the reigning mood; the sheikhs, no fools, also sensed the necessity of discretion; so did the Regent. For the time being the pyramid of power created by the British in conjunction with the sheikhs seemed no longer to have its old solidity.

Thus the pro-British element, though still strong in economic power, is at present in retreat politically. Nuri Said Pasha, the President of the Senate and the embodiment of a pro-British policy in the eyes of the Iraqis, left the country after the February debacle and could not safely return for the election. Saleh Jabr, the Prime Minister who signed the abortive Portsmouth Treaty, also left the country, intending to return in April: he was advised that he would be safer in Cairo than in Bagdad. Dr. Fadhil Jamali, the ex-Foreign Minister, returned to Bagdad, but had to have police protection for some weeks and stayed in voluntary retirement inside his home in the middle of Bagdad's Jewish district.

Yet another factor which has begun to militate against British influence is constituted by the minorities and tribal nationalities of Iraq. For many years these had looked to the British as their natural protectors, but they all claim now to have been bitterly disappointed in their trust and tend to look North for support. There are wild rumors in Bagdad about Russian activities among the Kurds, but closer inquiry reveals no unusual activity by Soviet agents; it is simply that the Kurds and other minorities in the North are, if anything, suffering even more than the Bagdadi from economic mismanagement, and routine Communist propaganda is therefore falling on fertile soil.

THIS internal disorder in Iraq has led to the injection of an important new factor into the situation. The United States government apparently decided during March of this year that Iraq was at least as important as Palestine, if not more so—that it was probably the key to the Middle East.

The Americans had lost faith in the capacity of the Iraqis to do anything for themselves; and they were convinced that the British were so unpopular that they, too, were incapable of doing anything to remedy the situation. As a result, the Middle East experts of the State Department worked out a plan in conjunction with the World Bank to provide Iraq with a Development Board and a Development Fund of 300 million dollars. This money was to be used to mechanize Iraq's agriculture, extend her water supply, and produce five million tons of wheat in Iraq in ten years' time—half the world's present wheat deficit. Certain strings were attached to the loan, not only for the Iraqis but also for the British. The

economic and commercial terms laid down by the United States would mean the general replacement of British influence by American.

The plan was sent to London for Mr. Bevin's consideration. At present writing, more than two months after the transmission of the American plan to London, there has still been no comment from the Foreign Office. (Neutral Middle East experts also question whether the American scheme is really practicable, but that is another matter.)

One thing is clear: the possibilities of Russian infiltration into the Middle East are much greater in Iraq than in Palestine; the country is hanging like a ripe fruit waiting to fall into somebody's lap. The British have lost Iraq: that much is certain. What remains still undecided is whether America or Russia will succeed her as the dominant power; or whether the Middle East states may not yet get together and maintain themselves in comparative independence and neutrality above the battle.

THE ROPE

JACOB SLOAN

*You cannot hold the rope by both ends,
Having both the world and justice.*

—MIDRASH

HE HELD both ends in his careful hands,
Then, looping one around his neck,
Flung the other to the firmament;
And, kicking away the righteous keg,
Hung and swung in neat content,
Strangled between world and justice.

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